

Teaching Tolerance in Public Education: Organizing the Exposure to Religious and Life-Stance Diversity

Ole Henrik Hansen – Nesna University College

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss how pupils' exposure to religious and life-stance diversity should be organized through the formal curriculum of public education in order to best foster tolerance. The article examines two proposals: the *Integrated French model* and the *Norwegian religious education model*. In view of *normative considerations* and *considerations of effectiveness*, it argues that although each model has its merits, they are both problematic because they in different ways fail to adequately balance the need for relevant exposure to religious and life-stance diversity with sufficient neutrality. By taking the Norwegian model as a point of departure, the article concludes by proposing two improvements - one calling for a sufficiently neutral value basis, and the other for a more mindful use of educational methods.

Keywords

Public education; religious education; tolerance; human rights; neutrality; diversity.

Introduction

Western liberal democracies are characterized by religious and life-stance diversity in the sense that its citizens hold a variety of conceptions of the good.¹ It seems reasonable to assume that in order to sustain peaceful coexistence, stability and social unity in liberal societies with this type of diversity, mutual tolerance among citizens would be beneficial. It is furthermore a fair assumption that public education has a significant role to play in the promotion of tolerance for different religions and life stances, and that some kind of exposure to religious and life-stance diversity through public education is a useful means in this regard. This view is supported by a consensus in Europe that there is an increasing need for strengthening the knowledge about religions and life stances in public education. This is clearly expressed by both the Council of Europe² and by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).³ How and to what extent this exposure should take place, however, is disputed among politicians, educational scholars as well as political philosophers, and it is a question which has been high on the agenda in most western democracies in the last decades. Exposure to religions and life stances in public education can take place within the formal curriculum, but also outside of it, for instance through the mere fact of pupils and teachers adhering to different religions and life stances spending time together. Brighouse suggests that we probably learn more about different ways of life through encounters with others, who live differently from us, than we do through the formal curriculum.⁴ Without denying the importance of such (extracurricular) exposure, this does not exclude the importance of the formal curriculum in the promotion of tolerance. The scope of this article will be limited to exposure as conceived within the formal curriculum.

The article discusses how pupils' exposure to religious and life-stance diversity should be organized through the formal curriculum of public education in order to best foster tolerance. The discussion will be based upon an examination of two different European

models for organizing exposure to religions and life stances in public education: the *Integrated French model* and the *Norwegian religious education model* as seen in the religious education subject known as *RLE* (“Religion, livssyn og etikk” [“Religion, Life Stance and Ethics”]).⁵ These models share the view that exposure to religions and life stances can have positive effects upon pupil’s ability to understand other religions and life stances and their adherents, and consequently upon the promotion of tolerance. Both models also have a “religious studies” approach to teaching about religions and life stances in the sense that teaching is non-confessional, and that the training and facilitating process of teachers and the development of curricula is the responsibility of the state.⁶ In the French model this state responsibility is exclusive, whereas the Norwegian model permits some cooperation with religious communities. Moreover, the two models differ when it comes to degree of exposure and how this exposure is organized in terms of subject structure, substance and educational methods as well as with respect to the national educational systems of which they are a part. The *Integrated French model* seeks to promote tolerance through objective knowledge about religions and life stances, not in a separate religious education subject, but integrated into subjects such as history, literature, philosophy and languages; the *Norwegian religious education model* holds that a separate religious education subject is better suited to reach this objective.

I will assess these models in view of two criteria of evaluation: *normative considerations* and *considerations of effectiveness*. In light of these considerations, I argue that although each model has its merits, they are both problematic because they in different ways fail to balance the need for exposure to religious and life-stance diversity on the one hand with sufficient neutrality towards different religions and life stances and human rights provision protecting the freedom of religion and belief on the other.

That being said, I regard the Norwegian religious education model as the more promising, despite its shortcomings. I will therefore propose two improvements. I will argue that in order to maximize the potential for promoting tolerance, public education should include a separate religious education subject aiming to teach pupils to both in-depth knowledge of as well as experiential familiarity with religions and life stances. At the same time it is crucial that public education maintain sufficient neutrality towards religious and life-stances groups.

The article will proceed as follows. In section one I will clarify the use the concept of tolerance in this context and its relationship with exposure to diversity. In section two, I will set out the two criteria of evaluation - normative considerations and considerations of effectiveness. Sections three and four will consist of a discussion of the integrated French model and the Norwegian religious education model. Finally, in section five, I will present my own suggestions for improving the Norwegian model.

Tolerance, knowledge and understanding

In this section I will first explain my understanding of what it means to promote tolerance in public education. Next, I will explicate the connection between the exposure to diversity on the one hand and the potential for promoting tolerance on the other.

Tolerance

I will in this article understand tolerance in a rather broad manner. First, I identify the promotion of tolerance as teaching pupils that in specific cases it is important to show restraint and non-interference when encountering values, opinions or behaviour that they object to. This relates to a classical liberal understanding of tolerance requiring the tolerator to object to what is being tolerated. In addition, I will understand promoting tolerance as the

educational activity of encourage pupils to become open-minded towards and even gain positive regard for what is different from themselves, i.e. different religions and life stances. This last understanding no doubt challenges the core concept of the liberal understanding of tolerance. In an educational context however, when tolerance is considered a normative ideal and a virtue, this wider understanding is often included.⁷ Neither it is incongruent with an everyday use of the concept of tolerance.

At the same time it seems clear that public education should not unconditionally promote tolerance for all values, opinions or behaviour advanced in the name of religions and life stances. Tolerance as a moral concept must include limits to the religious and life-stance diversity public education should promote tolerance for. How to identify this limit of tolerance is a challenge facing all types of normative activity, public education being no exception. This is a complex task and providing a clear answer is neither possible within the scope of this article nor necessary for a useful discussion of the topic at hand. I will nevertheless argue that public education should be careful about limiting the promotion of tolerance only to so-called reasonable religions and life stances. The main reason is that by limiting the scope to reasonable diversity we run the risk of marginalizing and alienating religious persons and groups in our midst who, even if they do not share the ideal of a liberal political order, otherwise have the disposition to abide by the law or engage in legitimate political participation.

Exposure to Diversity and the Promotion of Tolerance

I will defend the claim that exposure to religious and life-stance diversity through public education is a useful means for promoting tolerance. This position rests on one basic argument, which can be termed *the knowledge and understanding argument*. This argument holds that exposure to religions and life stances is crucial for us to acquire knowledge and

understanding of our fellow citizens' values and beliefs, and that such knowledge and understanding is beneficial for the promotion of tolerance.⁸ The core of this argument can be broken down to three causal links. The first link suggests that exposure to diversity benefits the acquisition of knowledge about this diversity. One could object to this link by arguing that exposure to religious and life-stance diversity does not automatically increase knowledge, and that exposure on the contrary can create misunderstandings and confusion. This is evidently true, but the objection seems to apply primarily when teaching is inadequate, and not when it is adequate and well-functioning, and the strength of the objection rests upon the assumption that the former state of affairs is the more prevalent in public education. That assumption must be mistaken, and in this regard it may be useful to bear in mind that the alternative to exposure to religions and life stances in public education is not the absence of it, since both media and other social settings are sources of such exposure. Given that religions and life stances at least in the media, frequently are characterized in a way that tend to stereotype or caricature them, it seems reasonable to assume that if public education teaches about religions and life stances, all things considered, it contributes to and secures a higher level of knowledge about these religions and life stances, than if it does not.

The second link connects knowledge with understanding and claims that the more knowledge one acquires about other religions and life stances, the better are the chances of understanding what it means to belong to another religion or life stance. By understanding I include a sense of identification with others as in being able to imagine how it is to be someone else. Against this claim, one could argue that even if the knowledge transmitted is adequate and sufficient, it may nevertheless create hostility and revulsion instead of identification and understanding simply because the differences revealed are so considerable. Admittedly, in some cases adequate knowledge may still lead to hostility. This critique, however, seems to apply more to extreme or intransigent persons or groups, where

understanding and tolerance may not even be desirable, and less to the more moderate majority of religions and life stances.

Finally, the third link connects understanding with tolerance, and claims that properly understanding others also makes it more likely that we come to tolerate them, than if we do not. This link rests upon the intuitive assumption that if we are able to attain a certain identification with others, we are more likely to realize both that in significant ways they are similar to us, but also that they are unique individuals worthy of respect, and that this realization makes us more disposed to putting up with or being more open-minded towards them.

Criteria of Evaluation

The point of departure for the discussion of the two models in the two following sections will be two criteria of evaluation. The first criterion involves *normative considerations*. This criterion addresses what specific means of promoting tolerance for diversity that should be considered desirable or undesirable from a general ethical perspective, as well as from a human rights perspective.⁹ Under a general ethical perspective, one could include a number of considerations. I will here focus on the ideal of neutrality or impartiality. By neutrality or impartiality I mean the ideal that the state should not favour or take sides between citizens' conceptions of the good.¹⁰ In this context, considerations of neutrality or impartiality may evaluate whether a given model of religious education happens to favour a particular religion or life stance through its curriculum or by way of educational methods. Under a human rights perspective I will take into consideration central human rights provisions protecting the parental right as part of the freedom of religion and belief. I will focus on article 18 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (hereinafter CCPR) and

article 9 as well as article 2 of Protocol No. 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights (hereinafter ECHR).

The second criterion is instrumental and involves *considerations of effectiveness*. This criterion means considering which of the outlined models is potentially the most effective in terms of promoting tolerance for religious and life-stance diversity. This criterion is closely related to the knowledge and understanding argument accounted for above, in the sense that the evaluations will be guided by considerations of how exposure is necessary to acquire knowledge and understanding of religions and life stances, and that this is beneficial for the promotion of tolerance. It is important to isolate this criterion because this allows us to examine how different ways of organizing exposure to diversity play out in relation to the objective of promoting tolerance.

Separating these two sets of considerations is done for analytical purposes, and is not meant to conceal the fact that they often are closely related. Sometimes normative considerations directly influence the choice of model for structuring exposure to religions and life stances by placing restrictions on a model that otherwise could have been effective. In other cases, normative considerations may undermine directly the effectiveness of a given model already implemented. If a religious education model is questionable or controversial from a human rights perspective, or is considered to violate standards of neutrality, such a model is likely to lose needed support from parents and pupils. This lack of support may consequently weaken the effectiveness of that model with respect to promoting tolerance. One can also imagine that the normative problems with a particular model are so considerable that an extensive exemption regime must be established to make it permissible, which thereby reduces its potential for promoting tolerance.

The Integrated French model

According to the integrated French model, knowledge of religion is important in order to develop understanding and tolerance among religious groups.¹¹ The imparting of educationally relevant knowledge of religion follows a religious studies approach and knowledge is to be integrated in other subjects or programs such as history, literature, philosophy and languages, rather than taking place in a separate religious education subject. The integrated model is currently being implemented in the French educational system. This process is the result of a quite recent and significant strategy change prior to which there was very little reference to religions in public education.¹² The core argument for not teaching about religion in public schools was that in order for the state to treat all its citizens equally, it should be neutral towards all religions. This requirement implied that the public sphere, including public schools, should as far as possible be kept free of any religious symbols and religious expressions. This argument was connected to and supported by the *laïcité* principle. The *laïcité* principle has been a defining feature of French history, society and politics which holds that religion belongs to the private sphere and the state therefore should be neutral towards religion. The *laïcité* principle, however, is not a thing of the past and the present solution of integrating knowledge about religions into an already existing subject should also be seen to a large extent as a requirement of neutrality inherent in the policy of *laïcité*. An outline of the background for the integrated model will explain the justification for the strategy change in more detail.

Since the 1980s there has been a public discussion in France concerning the negative consequences of the absence of knowledge of religions among French pupils. Many educators have even spoken of a crisis in public education in the sense that teachers have found it difficult to teach a number of literary, historical, philosophical or artistic topics because the students were unfamiliar with necessary religious cultural references.¹³ As a consequence,

some instruction in religion was introduced within school subjects in secondary schools from 1996. An opinion poll from 2000 showed that there was consensus in the population around three principal objectives for improving the status of teaching about religion; 1) to offer access to the cultural heritage and its symbolism, 2) to develop education of tolerance and 3) to promote understanding of the contemporary world. In light of these objectives, additional steps were made in 2001 when philosopher Régis Debray was given the task on behalf of the Minister of National Education of investigating the state of teaching about religion in French schools. In 2002, the report “L’enseignement du fait religieux dans l’École laïque” [The teaching of religious facts in the lay school system], the so-called “Debray Report,” was published, proposing that teaching about religion be strengthened.^{14 15} The report recommended and reaffirmed the earlier position, in which teaching about religion in public schools in France should not take place in a special religious education-subject, but rather be integrated into other subjects or programs such as history, literature, French and philosophy. In the wake of the “Debray Report”, the religious dimension in different subjects has been given more weight and focus. Texts with religious content being studied in literature classes, religious and philosophical concepts as well as authors and philosophers dealing with such concepts put on the agenda in philosophy classes, and the inclusion of historical dimension of specific religions in history classes illustrates this.¹⁶ In addition, strengthening of teacher training concerning religion and the establishment of the European Institute for the Study of Religion (IESR) was a result of Debray’s recommendations.

I will now discuss the integrated French model in light of *normative considerations*. In France, as we have seen, state neutrality to religion is a fundamental principle in public education in general. This ideal of state neutrality should also be seen as the main justification for the integrated model in particular. Several related arguments support this. First, as Debray himself argues, through avoiding a special religious education subject, the integrated model

will function as a safeguard against confessional forces taking gradually control over religious education.¹⁷ Second, by integrating religious topics in already existing subjects, teachers can more easily avoid controversial questions about religious truth or the spiritual dimension of religious life, as well as potential conflicts in the classroom following such questions. Thirdly, such a model evades the use of engrossing educational methods which naturally belong to a special religious education subject, and which may be problematic from a neutrality and a human rights point of view.

These arguments are well founded, but even though an integrated model per se is easier to harmonize with neutrality and human rights' considerations, this does not mean that these considerations by any means *require* such a model. Human rights provisions seem to be less restrictive on the presence and organization of religion in public education than the laïcité principle. The General Comment No. 22 § 6 to the CCPR, article 18, states that instruction in subjects such as the general history of religions and ethics is permissible if it is given in a neutral and objective way.¹⁸ Whether this requirement is fulfilled surely does not depend on whether knowledge about religion is given in a separate subject or integrated in other subjects.

There is also a feature pertaining to an integrated structure which may be problematic from a neutrality and a human rights perspective. The curriculum of the integrated French model shows that some world religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are either treated in passing, or entirely left out of public education.¹⁹ Even though some of this could be amended, it identifies a general problem: that some religions are not easily integrated because they do not naturally fit into other subjects' curricula, all of which have their own agenda.²⁰ It could be argued that this highly selective representation of religions in various subjects actually favours some religions and discriminates²¹ against others. I agree with Willaime²¹ that for national, cultural and historical reasons, not all religions should be granted an equal amount of time. Neither is this required by a viable ideal of neutrality, nor by the European

Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) which states that this question falls within the State's margin of appreciation in planning and setting the curriculum.²² Without attempting to draw any conclusions here, one may nevertheless question whether the marginal treatment, or even complete exclusion, of major religions in curricula and teaching goes too far and thereby fails to fulfill the requirement of neutrality both as an ethical norm and as a requirement for permissible religious education from a human rights perspective.

Based on *considerations of effectiveness*, I will present two arguments in favour of the integrated French model before turning to the objections. The first argument sees the integrated model in conjunction with the conceptualization of religion as a social fact. Regarding religion as a social fact implies a scientific approach to and an “outside perspective” on religion as a phenomenon covering all possible areas of human experience. Applied to public education, this means that a multitude of aspects of religion should be included in the teaching activities, and that the integrated model where several subjects take on this responsibility is well suited to accommodate this perspective. Based on this perspective, Bertram-Troost and Miedema argue that the integrated French model in fact widens the scope of teaching about religion instead of limiting it. If successful, the integrating approach gives pupils knowledge and understanding of different religions as they play out in a social and cultural context, thus benefiting the promotion of tolerance.²³

The second argument is connected to the ideal of neutrality, and is based upon the view that integrating knowledge about religions in already existing subjects is less problematic from both a neutrality and a human rights point of view, than having a special subject designated for this purpose. Subsequently, if the integrated model is perceived as neutral and impartial, this has positive effects on the promotion of tolerance as well; if pupils and parents regard public education as treating them and their religion fairly vis-à-vis others

and without prejudice, they are more likely to keep an open mind and develop a positive attitude towards school policies of teaching tolerance.

Although these arguments in favour of the integrated French model are significant, the model also faces problems. I will now discuss what I see as the most serious one in relation to the promotion of tolerance: This problem is connected to the *inadequate contemporary perspective* on religion. Even though the integrated model represents an improvement to the previous situation with only a limited presence of religion in public education, the contemporary perspective is still not sufficiently secured. Although integrating knowledge about religions in for instance literature, history or philosophy classes does not rule out a contemporary perspective, the integrated model seems to make it difficult to convey how religion is interpreted and understood as a living source of faith and morality by its adherents in present-day society. It seems as if relevant issues which are essential to understand the contemporary religious landscape are either marginally treated or left out because they are not naturally a part of other subjects' curricula. This can be illustrated by the predominance of the historical perspective on religions in French schools. This is partly the case for Christianity, but almost entirely so for Islam and Judaism. Illustrative is also, as mentioned above, that Hinduism and Buddhism, present in contemporary French society, but marginally treated in public education. Based on the knowledge and understanding argument, an inadequate contemporary perspective is disadvantageous to the promotion of tolerance in public education because it limits pupils' ability to understand their fellow citizens' values and beliefs. It is a mistake to believe that by avoiding issues concerning the role of religion today, some of which may be controversial, public education does not convey a message about these issues to the pupils and to society. The problem is that the message may be that religion is of secondary importance in modern society, which in case means that the schools have failed to convey the fact that religions plays a profound role in many people's lives. The message may

also be the opposite; religion is considered too important in the sense that it is too precarious or delicate to discuss in public education. Either way, it limits the acquisition of knowledge and understanding and thereby the potential for promoting tolerance.

I think that it is beneficial and perhaps even indispensable for promoting tolerance in public education that public education is neutral towards different religions, but I do not think it is sufficient. Neutrality per se does not contribute to the acquisition of the knowledge and understanding necessary to promote tolerance. It seems therefore that the integrated French model goes too far in its ambition to secure neutrality, since these values are interpreted and practiced so as to exclude socially relevant knowledge about religions from public education. The cultural and constitutional restrictions imposed by the *laïcité* principle, woven together, threaten to undermine the potential to develop the necessary understanding of these religions, and consequently the ability for public education to promote tolerance for religious diversity may also diminish.

The Norwegian Religious Education Model

The second model to be considered is the Norwegian religious education model, materialized in the RLE subject (“Religion, livssyn og etikk” [“Religion, Life Stance and Ethics”]).²⁴ This subject is, like the integrated French model, based on a religious studies approach. Unlike the French model, however, the Norwegian religious education model holds that tolerance for diversity is best fostered in a separate religious education subject. Another difference is that the Norwegian model provides pupils not only with comprehensive knowledge about a variety of religions and life-stances, but also ensures that they become familiar with what it means to adhere to these religions or life stances. The Subject Curriculum of the RLE subject states that “Knowledge about religions and life stances and about the function these have both as

traditions and as sources of faith, moral and interpretations of life are central to the subject”.²⁵ This means that a traditional knowledge based teaching, although important, is not sufficient to reach this goal. In addition, the use of “varied and engrossing work methods [...] in presenting all aspects of the subject” is also required.²⁶ Knowledge of aesthetic elements such as music, songs, art and architecture as well as religious holidays and rituals are included through various competence aims, thus expressing the experiential dimension as an integral part of the subject.²⁷ The aim of giving pupils an *experiential familiarity* with religions and life stances is underpinned by the emphasis on the contemporary perspectives throughout the Subject Curriculum, illustrated by the focus on “how religions and life stances are interpreted and practiced in the world and in Norway today”.²⁸ The contemporary perspective is also clearly present in the text-books used in public schools. The RLE subject is mandatory, but there is a limited right to exemption from those parts of the subject which parents (and pupils above the age of 15) perceive to be either “practice of other religions or adherence to other religions or life stances, or, as they on the same ground perceive to be offensive or demeaning”.²⁹ One cannot be exempted from knowledge of the different parts of the subject. Hence, one cannot be exempted from the subject as a whole.³⁰

Let us now consider how the Norwegian religious education subject comes out of a *normative evaluation*. The aim of giving pupils an experiential familiarity with religions and life stances, partly by the use of varied and engrossing educational methods is potentially problematic. There is a risk that the combination of educational aims and methods in educational practice may cross the line towards indoctrination, which is both ethically undesirable and from which citizens are protected from through freedom of religion or belief in both the CCPR and ECHR.³¹ It is precisely because of these dangers that the Subject Curriculum and in the Education Act stress caution in the use of engrossing educational methods, emphasize that proselytizing is not permitted, guarantee that information about

exemption rights and the content of teaching is given annually, and as an additional safety measure, grant limited exemptions rights.³² In light of these safety measures, the Norwegian religious education model would seem to be on safe ground concerning both questions of neutrality and human rights standards.

I find this conclusion to be slightly premature for two reasons. First, despite these efforts, the Norwegian religious education model fails to draw a sufficiently clear picture of what actually should go on in religious education classes. The obligation to provide annual information about exemption rights and the content of teaching is vague and unspecific and says little about when and how controversial methods are to be used, and more precisely what they contain. This vagueness gives the schools too large a scope of action and a too extensive margin of appreciation in the sense that, in practice, it is largely up to the local schools and teachers to make assessments concerning, for instance, the proper use of educational methods; in this respect, local traditions tend to prevail. There is, in other words, a high degree of unpredictability for parents and guardians as to the “when” and “how” concerning the use of the educational methods in question. According to the UN Human Rights Committee in the case of *Leirvåg et al v Norway* of November 2004³³ (hereinafter *Leirvåg case*) concerning the KRL subject, it was the difficulty for parents seeking exemption to distinguish the teaching of religious knowledge on one hand from the promotion of religious practice that caused a violation of article 18.4 of the CCPR, thus failing to respect “the liberty of parents [...] to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions”.³⁴ This unpredictability persists, despite the measures which have been undertaken.

Second, we must consider the RLE subject with regard to the national educational system as a whole, and particularly in combination with the value basis of public education. This is especially relevant since the RLE subject emphasizes giving pupils an experience of

other religions and life stances through the use of engrossing educational methods. Since these are potentially problematic aspects of the subject, strict limits are placed upon the value basis of public education as expressed in laws and regulations.³⁵ The *Core Curriculum* unequivocally and repeatedly states that the education shall be based upon Christian and humanistic values, and the recently adopted objects clause of the *Education Act §1.1* holds that “teaching should be based on basic values in Christian and humanistic heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and nature, freedom of conscience, neighborly love, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values which also are expressed in other religions and life stances and which are anchored in human rights.”

The question we must ask is whether the value basis, which also encompasses the RLE subject, is sufficiently neutral towards religions and life stances as well as compatible with central human rights provisions protecting the freedom of religion and belief. If it is not, the desirability of the RLE subject will be affected as well. It is difficult to predict whether the (material) changes made in the objects clause will be substantial enough to meet human rights standards. This depends to a large extent upon the procedural side of the matter (i.e. how the exemption regime in fact will be practiced). In the *Folgerø case*, where the European Court of Human Rights in a Grand Chamber judgment held by nine votes to eight, that the KRL subject had been in violation of article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights. As we have seen, the General Comment nr. 22 to article 18 of the CCPR, does not imply that compulsory religious education is unacceptable, but requires that it should be delivered in a neutral and objective way in order to be acceptable. The problem, from a neutrality perspective, is that the Core Curriculum in particular, but also in part the objects clause gives pride of place to certain conceptions of the good by identifying the values on which education is based upon as “Christian and humanistic.” Other religions and life stances, in contrast, remain unspecified and are only regarded as also expressing these values. In my

opinion, there is still reasonable doubt as to the question of whether Christianity and humanism, by their privileged position, can be considered favoured in public education.³⁶ The neutrality deficit of the value basis and the potential human rights problems thereby throw a “hegemonic shadow” on the RLE subject too.

Based on *considerations of effectiveness*, the Norwegian model seems to have much going for it, even if it also faces certain problems. I will discuss this in the following. The Norwegian model aims to give pupils thorough knowledge about a range of religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Baha’i, as well as secular life stances. In addition, the RLE subject gives pupils some experiential familiarity with the role these religions and life stances can play in the lives of the believers and that the use of engaging educational methods is vital to reach this objective. Based on the knowledge and understanding argument, this approach has the potential to promote tolerance, because it enables all pupils, both those affiliated with majority and minority religions and life stances, to identify somewhat with the adherents of other religions and life stances. I will also argue that these ambitions are better secured in a special religious education subject. It is difficult to imagine how to fulfill the goals of instilling both thorough knowledge of and experiential familiarity with different religions and life stances if these goals are to be incorporated in other subjects, since each has its own agenda and specific educational methods.

At the same time, focusing on the experiential dimension through the use of engaging educational methods presents certain challenges, not only from a normative, but also from an effectiveness perspective. One main challenge in this regard is connected to the *dangers of stereotyping*. It is not unknown that by emphasizing for instance the aesthetic dimension, different forms of exoticisms become tempting educational devices, which in turn may overemphasize the differences between religions and life stances.³⁷ If that is the case, misrepresentations and the confirmation of stereotypes and perhaps even prejudice may be the

consequence, which would inhibit genuine understanding and consequently reduce the potential for promoting tolerance. The RLE subject is unquestionably ambitious in its approach to religious education, and it requires highly competent teachers that have been properly trained to teach the details of religion and life stances, and to be cautious and balanced in the use of engrossing educational methods.

On the one hand, the national educational authorities seem to have taken this responsibility seriously, and that these risks and pitfalls are avoided through the course of teacher training and by pointing out in the Subject Curriculum that caution is to be used in the choice of methods.³⁸ On the other hand, there are also recent signs that point in the opposite direction; teacher training in RLE is, from 1 August 2009, no longer a compulsory part of the general teacher training program. Given the importance of knowledgeable teachers and the fact that many RLE teachers today do not have sufficient training in religions and life stances, this development is questionable.

Another challenge is the *problem of sufficient neutrality*. As we discussed in the previous section, the Norwegian religious education model faces challenges from both a neutrality and a human rights perspective. The problem was not primarily the religious education subject per se, but that the Core Curriculum and the objects clause favoured the Christian and humanistic tradition and that this neutrality deficit threw a “hegemonic shadow” over the RLE subject. The argument is if this subject is perceived by many adherents to minority religions and life stances as partial and problematic, this will reduce the ability of the RLE subject to foster tolerance. If pupils and parents do not regard public education as treating them and their religion fairly vis-à-vis others, they are less likely to keep an open mind and develop a positive attitude towards school policies of teaching tolerance. In addition, the chances that many pupils chose not to participate in parts of the subject may increase and also considerably reduce its ability to promote tolerance.³⁹

Two proposals

With the Norwegian model as a point of departure, I will in this section present two proposals for a religious education subject that I find to be particularly called for, and which I think will be more beneficial in promoting tolerance for diversity. The first addresses the need for a sufficiently neutral value basis, and the second suggestion calls for the separation of engrossing educational methods from ordinary classes.

By *a sufficiently neutral value basis* I mean a value basis which gives no pride of place to specific religions or life stances, or which expresses no exclusive connection between specific religions and life stances and the school in either educational laws, regulations or subject curricula. The *laïque* foundations of the French educational system are sufficiently neutral in this respect; the Education Act and the Core Curriculum of Norwegian public education are not. I will not attempt to spell out such revision here, but simply suggest that the aim of these revisions should be guided by the aspiration that the value basis should express a “respectful non-identification” with religions and life stances.⁴⁰ As mentioned previously, it is reasonable to assume that if the value basis, which encompasses all school subjects, is generally considered fair and impartial, the religious education subject is also more likely to be perceived as fair and impartial. This is a trivial, but important and often neglected point. A sufficiently neutral value basis will benefit the promotion of tolerance, because pupils and parents are more likely to keep an open mind, and develop a positive attitude towards school policies of teaching tolerance.

The second point concerns the use of educational methods, and calls for the *separation of engrossing educational methods* from ordinary classes. I have argued that such methods give pupils an experience of the profound role of religions and life stances in many people’s lives. At the same time, we have seen that such methods can be problematic from both a

human rights and an ethical perspective. From a strict human rights perspective, some have argued that the preferable solution would be to avoid any educational method which could be perceived as engrossing to avoid any conflict with parental rights.⁴¹ The problem with such an approach from an effectiveness point of view is that it could weaken the desired experiential familiarity with other religions and life stances and thereby reduce understanding and the potential for promoting tolerance. I think that a more promising solution is to increase the transparency of pedagogical practices by, as clearly as possible, describing what these methods contain and when they will be used, and to unmistakably separate them from ordinary religious education teaching. This should be clarified in semester plans and weekly plans. Such parts of the subject may typically be visits to religious or life-stance communities and vice versa, or it may involve educational methods which entail singing, drawing or painting or dramatizations in religious education classes. I propose that only these easily identifiable parts of the education should be subject to exemption, and that all ordinary classes should be compulsory. Such separation will make organizing these exemptions less difficult to administer for the school administration and the teachers. In addition, it will be easier for the parents to ensure that their pupils are exempted in accordance with their preferences. This transparency will also build trust and improve school-parent/guardian relations in the sense that parents or guardians will see that their rights to make fundamental decisions concerning their children's moral education are being respected.

It can be argued that such a way of organizing religious education is overly rigid and pedagogically complicated to administer, and that in practice, it downplays the important experiential perspective vis-à-vis the Norwegian religious education model. This form of religious education, admittedly, is less flexible and requires serious planning from educational administrators and teachers, and indeed poses a considerable pedagogical challenge. I will nonetheless claim that the positive effects of increased predictability compensate for these

shortcomings. That the experiential dimension will be subject to a higher level of institutional control does not diminish the value of this proposal.

¹ By life stances I here refer to comprehensive secular doctrines and world-views.

² The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Recommendation 1720, adopted on 4 October 2005 (<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/EREC1720.htm>).

³ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). 2007. *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*. Sungarf, Poland.

⁴ Brighouse, H. 2006. *On education*. New York: Routledge, p. 21.

⁵ Religion, livssyn og etikk (RLE). 2008. Oslo: Utdanningsdirektoratet.

⁶ Schreiner, P. 2007. Religious education in Europe. In Kuyk, E. (Ed.). *Religious education in Europe: situation and current trends in schools*. Oslo: IKO Publishing House, p. 9-16.

⁷ There are obvious theoretical problems with such a broad understanding of tolerance. I will not elaborate on these problems here. For more substantial discussions on the concept of tolerance, see Gardner, P. 1992. Propositional attitudes and multicultural education, or believing others are mistaken. In Horton, J. and Nicholson, P. (eds.) *Toleration: Philosophy and practice*. Aldershot: Avebury; Walzer, M. 1997. *On toleration*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Scanlon T.M. 2003. *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Cohen, A.J. 2004. What Toleration Is, *Ethics* 115, p. 68-95; Afdal, G. 2004. *Tolerance and curriculum: Conceptions of tolerance in the multicultural unitary Norwegian Compulsory school*. Oslo: Dissertation, Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology; Nehushtan, Y. 2007. The Limits of Tolerance: A Substantive-Liberal Perspective. *Ratio Juris*, 20(2), p.230-257.

⁸ A similar view has recently been advocated by the *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religion and beliefs in public school*, p. 9, 18.

⁹ It should be noted that even though human rights considerations and general ethical considerations in many instances converge, they are not identical. A given model of promoting tolerance may be desirable and permissible from a human rights (law) perspective, but nevertheless found to be undesirable and impermissible from an ethical perspective, and vice versa.

¹⁰ This is a fairly common understanding of liberal neutrality. See Dworkin, R. 1984. Liberalism. In Sandel, M. (Ed.). *Liberalism and its Critics*. New York: New York University Press, p. 64; Rawls. 1996. *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, p 192-193 and Wall, S. and Klosko, G. (Eds.). 2003. *Perfectionism and Neutrality*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., p. 6.

¹¹ Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale. 2003. *L'enseignement du fait religieux*, « *Les Actes de la DESCO* », Sceren CRDP de Versailles, p. 9.

¹² It should be pointed out that for historical and cultural reasons there have traditionally been regional differences concerning religious education in France. In Alsace-Moselle, religious education is a part of the regular curriculum. For details on this subject, see Plesner, I.T. 2008. *Freedom of religion and belief – a quest for state neutrality*. Oslo: Unipub.

¹³ Estivalezes, M. 2003. Teaching about religion in the French education system. *Prospects*, 33(2), p. 181.

¹⁴ Debray, R. 2002. *L'enseignement, du fait religieux dans l'École laïque*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

¹⁵ The expression "fait religieux" is meant to distinguish such teaching from confessional teaching. The expression is formerly used by Claude Levi-Strauss and is influenced by a Dürkheimian scientific perspective in which all social phenomena are regarded as facts. See Levi-Strauss, C., Éribon, D. 2001. *De près et de loin*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

¹⁶ Debray 2002, p. 34-35; Estivalèzes 2003, p. 182-184; Estivalezes 2006. Teaching about religion at School in France. In de Souza, M. (Ed.). *International handbook of the religious, moral and spiritual dimensions in education*. Dordrecht: Springer, p. 481-482; Estivalezes, M. 2007. Teaching About Religions in a Laïc Educational System. In Heimbrock H.-G. and Bakker, C. (Eds.). *Researching RE teachers. RE Teachers as Researchers*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, p. 133-134.

¹⁷ Debray 2002, p. 34-35

¹⁸ UN's Human Rights Committee, General Comment 22 on Article 18. 1993.

¹⁹ Estivalèzes 2003, p. 185, Estivalezes 2006, p. 481-482.

²⁰ A similar point is made by Lester, E. 2006. The right to reasonable exit and a religious education for moderate autonomy. *The review of Politics*, 68, p. 626.

²¹ Willaime, J.-P. 2007. Teaching religious issues in French public schools. In Jackson, R. (ed.). *Religion and Education in Europe*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, p. 99.

²² European Court of Human Rights. Folgerø and others v. Norway, 29 June 2007, Application no. 15472/02 Grand Chamber, para. 89.

²³ Bertram-Troost, G, Miedema, S. 2009. Semantic Differences in European Research Cooperation from a Methodological and Theoretical Perspective – Translation and Terminology. In Valk, P., Bertram-Troost, G., Friederici, M., Bérault, C. (eds.). *Teenagers' Perspectives on the Role of Religion in their Lives, Schools and Societies*. Münster: Waxmann Verlag, p. 36-37.

²⁴ The RLE subject was formerly known as the KRL subject ("Kristendoms-, religions- og livssynskunnskap") [Knowledge about Christianity, Religion, and Life Stance]. The KRL subject was first introduced in 1997, replacing a model where pupils could choose between two subjects, "Christian Education" and "Life Stance Education". RLE is the new name valid from August 6, 2008. I will use KRL when referring to the subject prior to August 6, and RLE after this date.

²⁵ RLE 2008, p. 1

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ This does not mean participation in activities which could be perceived as rituals.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 2

²⁹ *Opplæringslova (Norwegian Education Act) 1998*, §2.3a.

³⁰ The exemption rights are not exclusive to the RLE subject, but applies to all teaching activities.

³¹ See for instance the *Folgerø case*, para 84(h).

³² RLE 2008, p. 1; *Opplæringslova*, §2.3a, §2.4

³³ UN's Human Rights Committee. *Leirvåg et al v. Norway*, Communication No. 1155/2003, adopted 3 November 2004.

³⁴ Ibid., para 14.6.

³⁵ This is confirmed by the Human Rights Committee in the *Leirvåg case* (para14.3), which emphasized that the presence of a Christian objects clause was decisive to the conclusion that the KRL subject was not imparted in a neutral and objective way and thereby violated article18.4 of the ICCPR.

³⁶ The first reactions from the Norwegian Humanist Association also suggest that the new objects clause is not regarded as being able to unite across comprehensive divides.

³⁷ Sødal, H.K. (Ed.) 2006. *Religions og livssynsdidaktikk – en innføring*. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, p. 114-116.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117-181.

³⁹ Despite the shortage of empirical evidence, there is little to suggest that during the history of the KRL/RLE subjects, there have been a large number of pupils seeking exemptions. It would be a mistake to conclude from that, however, that this danger is not realistic. Both the *Leirvåg case* and the *Folgerø case* as well as substantial and long-term public controversy are indications of this.

⁴⁰ The term “respectful non-identification” is taken from Bielefeldt, H. 2006. The Liberal Concept of Political Secularism. In Tinnevelt, R. And Verschraegen, G. *Between cosmopolitan ideals and state sovereignty: studies in global justice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 99-108.

⁴¹ For this kind of argument, see Høstmælingen, N. (2005). Mandatory Religious Education that Builds Tolerance: Lesson to be learned from Norway? *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 13, p. 407-408.